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REDON

Michael Gibson

TASCHEN

Symbols and shadows

States of mind in pastel, charcoal, and oil

A major Symbolist artist, Odilon Redon (1840–1916) was also a painter of scenic and emotional extremes. Until around 1890, he was renowned for work in black and white only. These *Noirs* in charcoal drawing or lithograph were composed not only of a sombre palette, but also by fantastic, frightening figures. Gradually, the artist began to introduce coloured pastel, and with it, new and lighter motifs. Flowers became a recurring preoccupation. Where symbols of melancholy once stood, horses and fluttering butterflies entered the scene.

While this latter-day lyricism and harmony contrasted sharply with Redon's earlier mood of melancholy, his guiding principle remained to "place the visible at the service of the invisible." With his dream-like imagery, sumptuous textures, and suggestive use of colour, Redon sought to create a pictorial equivalent to his own psyche. From foreboding to lightness, he was above all an artist of states of mind, with considerable influence on later Post-Impressionism.

The author: **Michael Gibson** is an art critic, art historian, anthropologist, writer, and philosopher. He has written on art for numerous publications like *The New York Times* and *Connaissance des Arts*. Gibson is currently editor-in-chief of UNESCO's *World Heritage* review. His many books include the Redon monograph in hand and *Symbolism*, also published by TASCHEN.

"My drawings are not self-defining; they inspire. They determine nothing. Like music, they place us in the ambiguous world of the indeterminate."

– ODILON REDON

Front cover: *The Buddha* (detail), c. 1905
Pastel on paper, 90 x 73 cm (35½ x 28¾ in.)
Paris, Musée d'Orsay

Back cover: Odilon Redon in 1880
Photo: Bridgeman Images

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Michael Gibson

Odilon Redon

1840–1916

The Prince of Dreams

TASCHEN

ODILON REDON

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Clouds, Wonderful Clouds…

"As for myself, I habitually avert my mind from my painful genesis. Too weak for the struggle or perhaps disdainful of it, I waited; I put forth, as I could, and when circumstances permitted, works which were loved by a small circle around me […] They are the ones which cleared a way for me and which tell my story. I have reason to believe that the most recent will speak of the joy that makes restitution for bad beginnings."

— ODILON REDON, 1912

The name of Odilon Redon brings to mind a mysterious œuvre illumined by colours of strange intensity. There are luminous pastels in which the red of a poppy singled out amidst a bouquet all but eclipses the frame; the shimmering surface of *Homage to Leonardo da Vinci* (ill. p. 9) with its semblance of masterful improvisation; and the radiance of the series of stained-glass windows (ill. pp. 6, 8) in which dazzling colour alone evokes the luminosity of a cathedral window. Redon's art has a delightful, musical quality whose most perfect expression is the large decorative panels he created for the houses of various friends, along with certain of his later works—*The Buddha* (ill. p. 10), *The Birth of Venus* (ill. pp. 14, 15, 17) or the simple *Shell* (ill. p. 14), the latter of which was painted in 1912 for the pleasure of the artist's creole wife, who collected such things.

That a large part of Redon's works are in black and white—charcoal and chalk drawings and lithographs teeming with sombre visions, some strange, some terrifying, that seem to have emerged from a commonwealth of dreams—is well enough known. But it may come as a surprise to discover that Redon's work falls into two distinct periods. Until he was 50, darkness and the nocturnal were Redon's almost unrelieved obsession. The dazzling colours that we associate with his name came, unpredictably but irrevocably, at an age when most artists have already displayed the full range of their abilities and achieved much of their finest work. Colour transfigured the mood of his art and lit up the last 26 years of his life with joy.

"I have made an art according to myself." This strange, eloquent remark stands at the threshold of Odilon Redon's writings, which were collected and published by his son Arï under the title *À soi-même* ("To Oneself"). For those who know his work, the expression illuminates an essential aspect of this purest

Profile of a Woman in an Arch, 1905
Pastel on paper, 63 x 53 cm (24¾ x 21 in.)
Bordeaux, Musée des Beaux-Arts

This monograph does not always give the dates of Redon's works, as the artist rarely dated his work. He did keep a register in which he noted precise details of works, buyers and prices. Our captions follow Volumes I and II of the Catalogue raisonné published by the Wildenstein Institute in 1992 and 1994, edited by Alec Wildenstein.

The Window, c. 1907
Oil on canvas, 81 x 61.3 cm (32 x 24¼ in.)
New York, The Museum of Modern Art,
Gift of The Ian Woodner Family Collection

Stained-Glass Window, 1904
Charcoal, black and coloured pastel on buff paper, 87 x 68 cm (34¼ x 26¾ in.)
Paris, Musée d'Orsay

Redon has here contrasted his habitual sombre tones with dazzling colours that admirably evoke the luminosity of stained glass.

and most singular of artists. "I have done so," he continues, "eyes open to the marvels of the visible world and, whatever anyone says, constantly concerned to obey the laws of nature and life."

Odilon Redon is a paradigm of the pure artist. For an artist is not, in essence, a virtuoso. An œuvre can hold our attention and move us only to the extent that we perceive in it a response to a spiritual and emotional necessity. The artist seeks to compensate for some deep-rooted sense of lack which causes acute discomfort. Impelled by an existential unease whose nature is not our concern, he or she surpasses others despite feeling bereft of something which they apparently take for granted. "What distinguishes the artist from the dilettante," Redon observed, "is simply the pain experienced by the former. The dilettante looks to art only for his pleasure."

Odilon's father, Bertrand Redon (1799–1874), a native of Bordeaux, went to Louisiana as a young man to seek his fortune: "He was a settler, he owned negroes," says Redon, with his habitual concision. "He seemed to me an imperious

"I loved and still love the drawings of Leonardo: they are like an essence of life, a life expressed as much by outline as by relief."

— ODILON REDON, 1903

Homage to Leonardo da Vinci, c. 1914
Pastel on paper on cardboard, 145 x 63 cm (57 x 24¾ in.)
Amsterdam, Stedelijk Museum

Leonardo da Vinci
Virgin and Child with St Anne, c. 1503–19
Oil on poplar, 168.4 x 113 cm (66¼ x 44½ in.)
Paris, Musée du Louvre

being, independent in character, even harsh, before whom I have always trembled." It was nevertheless this man who first steered his child towards the realms of the imaginary and indeterminate so characteristic of Redon's work: "My father often used to say to me: 'Look at those clouds, can you see the changing shapes in them?' And then he would show me strange beings, fabulous and supernatural visions." Here, as so often in his writings, the artist reveals himself with endearing candour. His father's affection for him lay hidden beneath a rough exterior, as an 1868 letter from him testifies. It closes: "Your father who loves you always, though he does not show it."

In America, Bertrand Redon married a Frenchwoman. Five or six years later, he returned to France with his family, with Odilon, in his own words, "conceived and close to being born, the second fruit of the [my father's] union." The voyage was not easy, and Redon would recall that he might have been born on a ship in mid-ocean, "a place without a homeland, over an abyss." The phrase is neither romantic nor self-indulgent, for Redon had become one of those solitary, spiritually stateless persons who confront a psychological and existential abyss; this may indeed explain the recurrence of the sailing boat in his later work. He was born not at sea but a few weeks after the family reached Europe, on 20 April 1840, in Bordeaux.

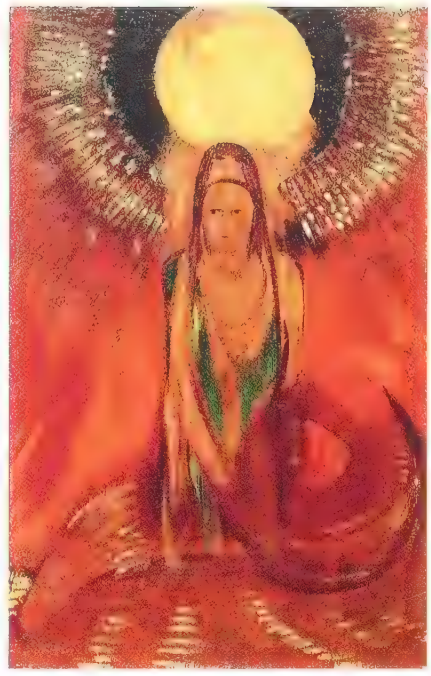
The frail child was immediately entrusted to a foster mother in the country and then to a kindly uncle ("good-natured face with blue eyes"), who lived on the family estate of Peyrelebade, near Listrac. It was an isolated manor house in a melancholy region, surrounded by badly neglected vineyards: "The ocean [...] once covered these wild spaces [...]. One is alone," said Redon, comparing his native region to Brittany, whose very air had, he wrote, amassed "a rich sediment of human soul [...] full of history and time, like a spirit of things, a spirit of legend too."

In this region of silence, the pine trees impressed themselves on his memory with their "constant sad susurration." He was fascinated by the shepherds who "with high stilts trace their strange outline on the sky [...]. The humanity one meets there seems prostrate, lifeless and dissolute, the eyes of each cast down, as though resigning both themselves and the place."

The description is empirical, but we hear in it the young Redon's sensitive and melancholy disposition. The pitiful faces of some of his drawings also derive from this period. Though he loved the place deeply in later years, he wrote that Peyrelebade had "had a great influence on my childhood and my youth, and even on my life." There he spent the first eleven years of his life, left to his own devices in the absence of his parents and siblings (he had a younger sister and three brothers).

His recollections suggest that his time was spent in daydreams: "One travelled by stagecoach and even by ox-cart, a monotonous locomotion, peaceful, and numbingly slow," which allowed him to observe the unfolding of the landscape "in a fixed state of contemplation and suggestion."

This self-portrait, a mixture of light and dark touches, is echoed by similar observations: "I see myself in those days as sad and weak." A sickly child, "weak-minded" in his own words, Redon was sent to school only when he returned to his parents. He seems to have projected his gloom and enthusiasm onto the clouds sailing in from the Atlantic in endless convoys: "Later, long afterwards [...] I spent hours, or rather whole days, stretched out on the grass, in empty stretches of countryside, watching the clouds pass, following with infinite pleasure the fairy-tale brilliance of their incessant changes."



The Buddha, 1896
Oil on canvas, 55 x 35 cm (21¾ x 13¾ in.)
Private collection

The Buddha, c. 1905
Pastel on paper, 90 x 73 cm (35½ x 28¾ in.)
Paris, Musée d'Orsay

Redon painted a number of religious figures (Buddha, Christ, Oannes and Saints) in the luminous style of his mature years.

Portrait of Madame Arthur Fontaine, 1901
Pastel on paper, 72.4 x 57.2 cm (28½ x 22½ in.)
New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art,
The Mr. and Mrs. Henry Ittleson Jr.
Purchase Fund

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Woman in Red, 1895–1900
Pastel on paper, 68.5 x 53.8 cm (27 x 21¼ in.)
Paris, Musée d'Orsay

Nude with Blue Scarf, c. 1900–05
Pastel and charcoal on paper,
44.1 x 36.5 cm (17¼ x 14¼ in.)
Philadelphia Museum of Art

Such a childhood, spent in solitude like that of an orphan up to the age of eleven, favoured a melancholy disposition. Indeed, it might have caused lasting depression. But his inner resources were also quick to emerge. Frail and gentle as he was, he did what many children of that age do, even under more brutal circumstances: he assumed that "this was the way things were" and uncomplainingly put up with his fate.

The sombre and highly imaginative quality of his first period has prompted an unfortunate comparison with Francisco José de Goya (1746–1828). Redon himself produced a series of lithographs entitled *Homage to Goya*, which have been thought to justify the comparison. Yet the differences between the raging vitality of the Spanish artist, whose every line seems to excoriate some monstrous trait of human nature, and the gentle dreams of Redon are clear enough. Redon's character, his contemplative melancholy, inhibited his development for a long time.

His sensitivity too, the very foundation of his art, could, when the artist's critical sense was wanting, lead to sentimentality—rather as the tremendous

The Birth of Venus, c. 1912
Pastel on beige paper,
84.4 x 65 cm (33¼ x 25½ in.)
Petit Palais, Musée des Beaux-Arts
de la Ville de Paris

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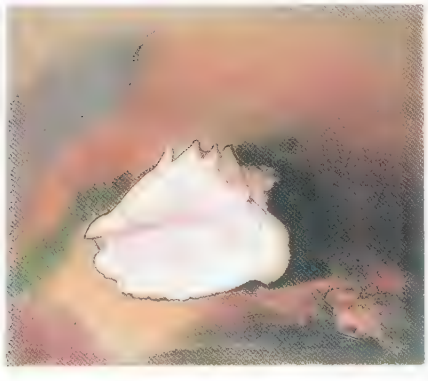
The Birth of Venus, c. 1912
Oil on canvas, 143.2 x 62.5 cm (56½ x 24½ in.)
New York, The Museum of Modern Art,
Gift of The Ian Woodner Family Collection

The Shell, 1912
Pastel on paper, 52 x 57.8 cm (20½ x 22¾ in.)
Paris, Musée d'Orsay

This shell belonged to Redon's wife, who came from Île Bourbon. Redon used it for his many variations on the theme of the Birth of Venus.



energy of a Pablo Picasso (1881–1973) could, at the other end of the spectrum, sink into brutality.

"One must be modest," Redon declared, "in putting before the eyes of the public the whole of one's production—always uneven, good or bad some years, with good days and bad days." The *Homage* does indeed acknowledge a debt to Goya. But the debt was of neither style nor content; it was the revelation that art need not be exiled among the things of the world, but was free to explore the inner realms. In this respect Rembrandt, too, was a precursor: "The day on which Rembrandt advised his students against travelling and above all against the journey to Italy, on that day, I believe, he became the precursor of all deeply inward art." Hence Redon's unambiguous conclusion: "Art is a flower which blossoms freely, to the exclusion of all rules; in my view, it leaves in sad disarray the microscopic analyses of the 'aestheticians' who seek to explain it."

Odilon Redon was long in finding himself, and it seems that his maturity was prompted by the crucial emotional experiences of the second half of his life.

Orpheus, 1900
Oil on canvas, 73.5 x 54 cm (29 x 21¼ in.)
New York, The Ian Woodner Family Collection

"Within each of us at birth," he said, "is a potential Other maintained, cultivated and saved by our will—or not saved." His own qualities are incomparable: his exceptional mastery of black and white, his coruscating colours, and above all the moving transformation in his work during the 1890s. Late in life, remembering a great friend and mentor of his late teens, the botanist Armand Clavaud (1828–1890), he observed: "I wish I could now put before him my resolved thought, more certain than it was before. He knew in me only the sensitivity of a wavering and contemplative being, entirely wrapped up in his dreams." It was the elder friend Clavaud who led him to the literature of his day; it was through Clavaud's microscope that Redon first discovered the world, then all but unknown, of the infinitely small.

When he returned to his family after eleven years at Peyrelebade, Redon was promptly enrolled as a day student in a boarding school in Bordeaux: "I recall

only being late for classes, putting so much effort into work that it pained me. How often I cried over my books [...]."

On their return from America the family had settled in the Saint-Seurin quarter of Bordeaux. The church of Saint-Seurin, with its hybrid architecture, was the focus of religious practices that were part of the urban folklore.

Robert Coustet mentions the low, heavy vaults of the narthex, the capitals decorated with monstrous figures, the ample nave, the chapels sunk in shadow, and most important of all, the crypt. "One descended a narrow staircase, its steps well-worn, to reach the underground chapel. Two rows of short pillars, topped with rough-hewn capitals, supported the vaults beneath which rested the sarcophagus of Saint Fort. Each year, in spring (16 May), pious mothers led their children to the saint's tomb, so that he might impart to them a share of his strength and guarantee their health. It seems highly unlikely that young Odilon, who made his first communion in Saint-Seurin, never ventured into the crypt [...]" (catalogue Bordeaux, 1985). Redon himself remembers being a "radiant visitor of churches" at that time, while his first communion evoked other associations too. At the age of 60, Redon, a man of exquisite reserve, confided to his diary: "I love little girls; in each one I see woman without finding a woman, and that is exquisite [...]. When I was a child I remember how impressed I was by them. The first time was in the garden of the house where I was born (in Bordeaux, allées d'Amour). She was blonde, with large eyes, and her hair fell in long curls on the muslin dress which brushed against me. A shiver went through me. I was 12, I was about to make my first communion [...]."

Redon began drawing when he was still a small boy. He was precocious, and won a prize for drawing at the age of 11, "even before [he] could read." When he was about 15 he was allowed to take drawing lessons with the painter Stanislas Gorin (1824–1874) on his days out from school. "He was a distinguished watercolourist and very much an artist. His first words—I will always remember them—were to advise me that I too was an artist and should never allow myself so much as a single pencil mark in which my sensibility and mind had no part."

The Birth of Venus
Oil on canvas, 21.6 x 16.5 cm (8½ x 6½ in.)
Private collection

Marine Divinity or ***The Birth of Venus***
Oil on canvas, 33 x 46 cm (13 x 18 in.)
Private collection

Portrait of a Young Blonde Girl: Jeanne Roberte de Domecy, 1905
Charcoal on paper, 50 x 37 cm (19¾ x 14½ in.)
Private collection

This portrait was made at the time when Redon was painting the large decorative panels for the house of his friends at Domecy.

Master and pupil spent these days in the artist's studio, which stood in the midst of a garden overflowing with flowers, working under "a large bay window that let in the light from the edge of a small wood."

Gorin took the young Redon to exhibitions, giving his comments on the works of Jean-François Millet (1814–1875), Camille Corot (1796–1875), Eugène Delacroix (1798–1863) and the young Gustave Moreau (1826–1898), again and again stimulating Redon's enthusiasm. "It was with him that I learned the essential law of creation [...] that art-organism which cannot be learned by rules or formulas [...]."

When Redon was 17, his parents demanded that he should study architecture. He spent some time working for an architect, and did "much descriptive geometry, piles of working drawings" before taking the entrance examination of the "School of so-called Fine Arts," where he failed the oral examination.

Portrait of Ari Redon, c. 1898
Pastel on pale blue wove paper, 44.8 x 30.8 cm (17⅝ x 12¼ in.)
Art Institute of Chicago, Bequest of Kate L. Brewster

Armour, 1891
Charcoal and Conté crayon on paper,
50.7 x 36.8 cm (20 x 14½ in.)
New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art,
Harris Brisbane Dick Fund

In addition to the sometimes insipid imaginary heads that Redon painted, there were others, like this helmeted head bristling with spines, which seems to belong to a world of dreams.

This work proved useful in the course of time: "I found it easier to place the probable and the improbable side by side, and could give a visual logic to the elements of the imagination that I glimpsed." Traces of this training perhaps appear in the superb treatment of the sphere in the two versions of *The Cannonball* (1878, Paris, Musée du Louvre, Département des Arts graphiques).

At the age of 24, Redon was admitted to the class of the academic painter Léon Gérôme (1824–1904) at the "School of so-called Fine Arts" (Redon reiterates this expression) in Paris. With painful modesty, the young man tried to conform: "I was tortured by the teacher [...]. He was clearly trying to inculcate in me his own vision [...] or to put me off art itself [...]. So vehement were his corrections that a stir went through my classmates whenever he came near my easel." Young Redon saw in reality forms palpitating and uncertain; Gérôme wanted it given definition by an outline. For Redon, this was intolerable: "I feel

Joan of Arc (?), c. 1900
Pastel on paper, 52 x 36 cm (20½ x 14¼ in.)
Paris, Musée d'Orsay

Saint Sebastian, 1910
Pastel on paper, 66.7 x 53.7 cm (26¼ x 21¼ in.)
Takasaki, Gunma, The Museum of Modern Art

Saint Sebastian, c. 1910
Pastel on paper, 70.8 x 55.3 cm (28 x 21¾ in.)
Bordeaux, Musée des Beaux-Arts

Saint Sebastian, a conventional figure of martyrdom, was bound to a tree and executed by Numidian archers.

only the shadows, the apparent depths; all outline is indubitably an abstraction." Redon's perceptive account of this episode led him to a very modern conclusion: "No one makes the art that they want to," he noted. The work is made "according to its own laws."

Much later, analysing the effect of his own work, Redon formulated it precisely: "My drawings are not self-defining; they inspire. They determine nothing. Like music, they place us in the ambiguous world of the indeterminate." This priority given to the indeterminate, used to lure the spectator into the aesthetic interaction, tends to render a title superfluous. "The title is justified only when it is vague, indeterminate; when it aspires, confusedly, to the ambiguous."

Back in Bordeaux in 1865, having suffered a whole year of the implacable Gérôme, Redon met a soul as pure as his own in Rodolphe Bresdin (1825–1885). The work of this romantic engraver, whom Redon described as "both commoner and aristocrat," was akin to that of Albrecht Altdorfer (c. 1480–1538) or Matthias Grünewald (c. 1470/80–1528). At the time, Bresdin was living in one

The Barque, c. 1902
Pastel and charcoal on paper,
61 x 50.8 cm (24 x 20 in.)
New York, The Museum of Modern Art,
Gift of The Ian Woodner Family Collection

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Saint John the Baptist or ***The Blue Tunic***, 1892
Pastel on paper, 42.5 x 29 cm (16¾ x 11½ in.)
New York, Private collection

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Sita, c. 1893
Pastell, charcoal and black Conté crayon on
cream wove paper, 53.6 x 37.7 cm (21 x 15 in.)
Art Institute of Chicago,
Joseph Winterbotham Collection

This beautiful haloed head rests on a luminous embryonic form born from the darkness of space and perhaps symbolic of origins in general.

of the city's "half-built areas," the rue Fosse-aux-Lions, which has since been demolished. Bresdin, who lived a life of almost complete destitution, pointed out the irony of his address (Lion-Pit Street) with rueful humour.

Bresdin taught Redon etching and lithography, "with the greatest concern for my independence." In fact, Redon signed his first etching (*The Ford: Landscape with Horsemen*, 1865–66) "O. Redon, pupil of Bresdin." But Bresdin also opened Redon's eyes to the world of the imagination: "Once he told me with gentle authority: 'Look at this chimney flue. What does it say to you? To me it recounts a legend. If you have the strength to observe and understand it, imagine the most strange, the most bizarre subject; if it is based on and remains within this simple section of wall, your dream will be alive. That is art.'"

The preparations necessary for an artistic career were, by now, complete. The young man had acquired his craft, his imagination had been stimulated. Yet the Redon that interests us today was still a long way ahead. The young artist was now painting numerous small landscapes; he kept almost all of them, thanks to which the Louvre, which received a considerable donation from Suzanne Redon—Ari's wife—in 1982, now owns many. They are modest in ambition, but the intensity of the sunlight striking here a tree, there a piece of wall, seems to herald the interaction of dark and light that is so apparent in the second phase of his production.

From the outset, Redon devoted much time to the study of the kind of subject that attracts draftsmen: faces, bodies, horses, trees, rocks, houses, landscapes, flowers and leaves. And the years went by. In 1868, his *Roland at Roncevaux* was accepted by the Bordeaux Salon. In 1870, when Prussia invaded France, the young man was involved "with much emotion in the harrowing turmoils of a battle on the Loire, near Tours: a senseless day that disturbed me deeply, leaving me with a sense of pity and pain at an hour of such inexorable ruthlessness, as though I had subjected myself to the barbarity of a different

The Mystic Barque, 1890–95
Pastel on paper, 51 x 63.5 cm (20 x 25 in.)
New York, Andrea Woodner Collection

For Redon, the birth and survival of his second child came as a late confirmation of the reality of his links with the world. Now, in his happiness, he could hoist the dazzling sail of his "mystic boat" and set sail for the distant glimmer of paradise.

humankind." At about the same time, Bresdin and Gustave Courbet (1819–1877) played an active part in the Commune, after which Bresdin travelled to Canada in 1872 for safe-keeping. He returned to France in 1877 and found himself reduced to sweeping streets for a living. Towards the end of his life, he was official road-mender at the Arc de Triomphe.

It was on his return from the Prussian campaign that Redon at last felt confirmed in his artistic calling: "The merest sketch or scribble [...] in my portfolio took on a new sense. And that was the true date of my determination" (Letter to Edmond Picard, quoted from Mellerio, 1913). The interruption to his routine and the brief confrontation with war and death perhaps played a part in this decision. Redon began using black consistently from 1875. Earlier in the decade, a variety of works touching upon the horrible, the funereal or the fantastic anticipate the later work. But Redon's dates of execution are never easy to establish: an artist outside time, he rarely dated his works. With his father's death in 1874

Silence* or *The Black Sun
Oil on cardboard, 32 x 23.5 cm (12½ x 9¼ in.)
Private collection

Redon liked to depict enigmatic emblems of unspecified spiritual forces in his indistinct forms. According to the Wildenstein Institute catalogue, this little oil on board was one of the artist's favourite works, and for a long time he kept it on his desk.

Two Veiled Personages
Oil on wood-backed canvas
35 x 26.5 cm (13¾ x 10½ in.)
Private collection

Apparition, c. 1905
Oil on wood, 67 x 40 cm (26½ x 15¾ in.)
New York, The Museum of Modern Art,
Gift of The Ian Woodner Family Collection

the family found itself in financial straits. Was Bertrand Redon's death experienced as a liberation by his son—who was, by then, already 34? In 1879 he published a first sequence of lithographs, *In Dream*, which were greeted with enthusiasm by the critic and novelist Joris-Karl Huysmans (1848–1907).

On the first of May 1880, Redon married Camille Falte, a young creole woman from Île Bourbon (later Réunion). She was a lively, resolute woman who thereafter handled all the artist's business with dealers and the press. Redon had just turned 40, and devoted that entire decade to what he termed *Les Noirs* ("the black works"). "In Madame Redon," he later wrote to André Mellerio, his first biographer, "I found something like a sacred thread, the Fate of my life, who helped me to survive the most tragic but secret moments of my family drama [...]. I believe the yes I uttered on the day of our union was the expression of the most complete and unadulterated certainty I have ever experienced. A certainty more complete even than my vocation." (*Lettres d'Odilon Redon*, p. 37)

Six years later, on 11 May 1886, Jean, their first child was born. He died six months later. These were probably the "tragic but secret moments of my family drama" that the artist had in mind. "The affection of the father," Redon observed some months later, "is the very creation of his child: it is his prize, his conquest, his triumph. And this infinite attachment—which is a certainty—is a mystery when broken." Huysmans was among those who gathered round in time of sorrow: "Our dear Huysmans was full of compassion," Redon later wrote. "Though he claimed to hate children, he kept watch with my wife and I throughout the night at the side of the child we had lost. He said, as though to justify himself: 'Your children are not like those of other people'" (quoted in Léon Deffoux, *J.-K. Huysmans sous divers aspects*, Brussels, 1942).

Arï, their second child, was born two and a half years later, on 30 April 1889. "Everything is going well at last," Redon announced, in June of that year, in a letter to his mother. "So well, in fact, that I am afraid. It seems too beautiful." And it was at the birth of Arï, or shortly thereafter, that colour finally entered the painter's work. Odilon Redon was then approaching 50. "Art," he observed, "obeys secret laws and also has a share in the events of life."

In 1897, as a result of a disagreement between the Redon brothers, the family estate at Peyrelebade was put up for sale. Redon went down for a final stay, which lasted eight months. He returned to those parts 17 years later, two years before his death: "Under a lovely light and a beautiful sun," he wrote to his friend Dr Raymond Sabouraud (1864–1938), "I travelled to the Medoc during the vendange. I am glad I did, for now that I am there no longer, I understand the fatal origins of the mournful art I produced there [...]."

The Druidess, 1893
Charcoal heightened with pastel on paper,
39 x 33.5 cm (15¼ x 13¼ in.)
New York, The Ian Woodner Family Collection

The Artist Is an Accident

"The artist [...] is an accident. Nothing awaits him in the social world. He is born naked on the straw, with no mother to prepare his swaddling clothes. Young or old, he has no sooner offered the rare flower of originality—which is and must be unique—than the perfume of that unknown flower troubles people and everyone turns away from him. Whence, for the artist, a fatal, even tragic isolation." (diary entry, 1912)

Odilon Redon wrote these words with his own experience in mind. No doubt he was also thinking of his mother's absence during the early years of his own life. The phrase "with no mother to prepare his swaddling clothes" is the more poignant when we realise this. The primary sense is metaphorical, the second literal and autobiographical—an admission apparent to those who read between the lines. But Redon was also thinking of his friend Bresdin, doomed, for lack of a fortune of his own, to "all the hardships of disenchantment." For it is true that nothing in the social world awaits the artist—whether a relatively well-off Redon or an impoverished Bresdin.

This is hardly a surprise. All institutions, and society as a whole, no matter how efficiently they function, must devote their attention to a limited number of well-defined tasks. That is, after all, the purpose of their existence. They cannot accomplish this without becoming set in their ways, without adopting prejudices and routines essential to the accomplishment of such tasks. The people who run these institutions are inevitably tempted to fit the artist and his work into patterns that they themselves are constantly using. They imagine that art is intended to entertain them, or to serve an ideal (the institutional ideal, of course) or the state, or indeed the market. It is these suppositions that Redon's contemporary, Oscar Wilde (1854–1900), sought to refute with his assertion: "All art is quite useless." These words expressed the unspoken conviction of the philistines of his day but Wilde, the master of paradox, reclaimed them and made of them a proclamation of the unique and incomprehensible importance of art. To which the modest Redon might almost be responding when he writes: "I thought in former days that art was useless; it might perhaps be necessary."

The work of art removes its spectators from the practicality of daily life, transporting them towards dream, doubt and the ill-defined: "Are you sure things are as you have always supposed?" This is the challenge the work of art

Profile
Oil on cardboard, 24.5 x 28.5 cm (9¾ x 11¼ in.)
Private collection

The Predestined Child or *Ophelia*
Oil on canvas, 65 x 54 cm (25½ x 21¼ in.)
Private collection

Orpheus, c. 1903-10
Pastel on paper, 68.8 x 56.8 cm (27 x 22¼ in.)
The Cleveland Museum of Art,
Gift from J. H. Wade

According to the legend, Orpheus was torn apart by the Bacchants. His head, carried off downriver on his lyre, continued to sing.

presents to both individual and society, like a troubling dream whose memory saps the convictions of the waking dreamer. More than any other major French artist of his day, more even than the actively rebellious Paul Gauguin (1848–1903), Redon matured in silence and seclusion outside the "social world". Yet as an artist he stood at the centre of the realm of the imagination, and his artistic daydreams coincided in mysterious ways with the great collective daydream that we call culture, which is endlessly being reshaped by literature, the arts and music, and which nurtures us all.

At a time when many artists—from Gustave Courbet to Thomas Couture (1815–1879)—were executing monumental works, Redon consistently preferred to work on a small scale. He justified his taste and deplored the fact that even the greatest masters sometimes proved guilty of "excessive size in the surface painted or drawn." He criticised Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528) and even Rembrandt (1606–1669)—though he admired the latter more than any other artist—for very large-format etchings which are "far from the perfection that transpires in plates of normal size." Redon added: "The most perfect works were produced in a size recommended by taste and reason; but the sizes that a mediocre artist easily lights on seem rather the effect of chance than conscious choice in the works of the most inspired artists."

Redon invokes unspecified formal motives for preferring a smaller format, but the question he raises relates to the significance of his entire corpus, and thus invites one to contemplate the significance of scale in painting. All paintings are read as signs. There are discreet signs which establish an immediate and intimate communication. Others, ampler, more emphatic and rhetorical, address society as such. The large-scale work is particularly suited to subjects connected with the fate of society—consider, for instance, Michelangelo's *Last Judgement*, Delacroix's *Liberty Guiding the People* (1830, Paris, Musée du Louvre) or even Courbet's *Burial at Ornans* (1849–50, Paris, Musée d'Orsay).

Naked Woman on a Rock
Oil on canvas, 50 x 64 cm (19¾ x 25¼ in.)
Private collection

Such works set out major religious, political or philosophical principles on a declarative, emotional register.

Other large-scale works may be taken as confessions or experiments not directly related to broader social drives. Much so-called "post-modern" art seems to belong to this category. Certain contemporary artists seem to express a more or less conscious irony about the ideological implications of large-scale works. Some produce huge canvases in which the great collective issues are treated with derision, while others, who appear to assume that even their most intimate experiences are of vital concern to the world at large (or who merely fail to grasp the significance which inevitably attaches to large canvases), paint on the scale of Théodore Géricault's (1791–1824) *Raft of the Medusa* (1819, Paris, Musée du Louvre) subjects which could more appropriately be dealt with on a modest scale, befitting the artist's confiding manner. For scale is commanded not merely by formal but by psychological considerations. What someone tells us in private at the end of a meal would have a quite different meaning if it were communicated to a large audience through a public address system. Redon's work speaks in an intimate tone, even when he paints large surfaces, as he did in Domecy, in Gustave Fayet's (1865–1925) Fontfroide Abbey or in the home of the composer Ernest Chausson (1855–1899) in Paris; such works were intended to be seen only by the families that commissioned them and by their guests.

Nude, Begonia and Heads, 1912
Watercolour, 17.6 x 25.2 cm (7 x 10 in.)
Private collection

These nudes (ill. pp. 34, 36, 37) possess a sensuality unusual in Redon's work. The head growing on a stem is a late reminiscence of the sad flowerheads of his more sombre earlier years.

The work of an artist like Odilon Redon thus helps one to establish a distinction between the social and private domains (the latter broadened to include the family and its circle of friends). This distinction has practically disappeared in the arts today. Yet when artistic influence flows outwards, however imperceptibly, from the privacy of the individual or family towards society, we can expect authentic works to result. When, on the other hand, it flows the other way, in dogmatic and authoritarian fashion, inward, from the social to the private realm, we can quite possibly expect a greater number of conventional and academic works.

Redon knew and loved many painters, writers and poets. Older painters, like Corot, offered advice: "Place a certainty next to each uncertainty" he told Redon. The writers—pre-eminent among them Stéphane Mallarmé (1842–1898) and Huysmans—gave him their enthusiastic support. Redon was a passionate music lover. His friend Armand Clavaud taught him not only about botany and microscopic forms such as cells and infusoria, but also about evolution, Indian philosophy and Buddhism. Culture was Redon's world.

Redon lived at a time of great social and political agitation—but it seems that he did not feel it his business to express such things. In the passage from *À soi-même* quoted earlier, in which the artist admitted to having spent days on end lying on the ground and watching the clouds go by, he added that this

Temptation, c. 1912
Watercolour and Conté crayon on cream wove paper, 17.8 x 25.1 cm (7 x 10 in.)
New York, The Museum of Modern Art, Gift of Dian Woodner

Ophelia among the Flowers, c. 1905–08
Pastel on paper, 64 x 91 cm (25¼ x 36 in.)
London, The National Gallery

The mad Ophelia is carried off by the current, surrounded by the "fantastic garlands" that she had gathered, "as one incapable of her own distress, / Or like a creature native and indued / Unto that element," till her garments pull her "to muddy death." (*Hamlet*, Act IV, Scene 7)

continued "a long time after [childhood]," and: "I dare not say till what age, for you would call me an incomplete man." And he was no doubt "incomplete" to the extent that the circumstances of his childhood had deprived him of many things, including the crucial phase of socialisation which begins around the age of six or seven. But this very lack made him an exceptional being, opening up for him the realms of imagination and representation that underpin active life. He found equilibrium only in the acceptance of his singularity.

Consider nonetheless the events that marked his 1840–1916 lifespan. At the time of the 1848 revolution in France and Germany, the artist was only eight years old and still in exile among the pines and shepherds of Peyrelebade. He reached Bordeaux at about the time Louis Bonaparte was proclaimed Emperor of the French under the name Napoleon III. During the decades that followed, the French industrial revolution transformed the country—a development punctuated, in 1870, by a disastrous war in which Redon briefly took part. He was then 30 years old.

The tremendous social upheavals of the age, the development of militant unionism, the confrontation between the Catholic Church and the secular French state, the Dreyfus Affair and the outbreak of the First World War passed

Ophelia, 1900–05
Pastel on paper on cardboard,
50.5 x 67.3 cm (20 x 26½ in.)
New York, Dian Woodner Collection

him by, leaving no trace in his œuvre. And that is as it should be: "I belong to no party," he wrote to Andries Bonger (1861–1936), the collector who had promoted his work in Holland. "I have always felt that an artist is alone and can only be alone. Though I don't know how to classify myself today, I do know where I am not. And nothing else" (quoted after Bacou, 1956). And finally, in 1913, he jotted down the following observation: "I see in a window a book entitled *Social Art*. It is repugnant. I open it none the less, and see 'Socialization of Beauty,' and I close it" (diary entry, April, 1913).

Vase of Flowers and Profile
Oil on canvas, 65 x 81 cm (25½ x 32 in.)
Private collection

This work, like those on the preceding pages, mainly serve as pretexts for Redon to depict flowers and butterflies in all their brilliant colours.

Black

Everything begins with black. Redon wrote the word with a capital—*Le Noir, Les Noirs* (he also spoke of *mes ombres*, "my shadows")—to refer to his nocturnal visions bathed in the half-light he so admired in Rembrandt, and which he created through charcoal or lithographer's ink. "In the last analysis," he said, in a letter to the painter Émile Bernard (1868–1941), "black is the most essential colour, is it not?" True, at the same time Redon was executing occasional works in oil and pastel, landscapes (already discussed), self-portraits, some portraits of his wife and a number of copies of masterworks in museums. He executed eleven etchings in 1865 and 1866, while working with Rodolphe Bresdin. The Louvre owns over 500 Redon drawings. They include studies of trees, plants, mountains, nudes, heads, spiders and imaginary subjects. But the major part of Redon's production between 1865 and 1890 was devoted to charcoal drawings and lithography.

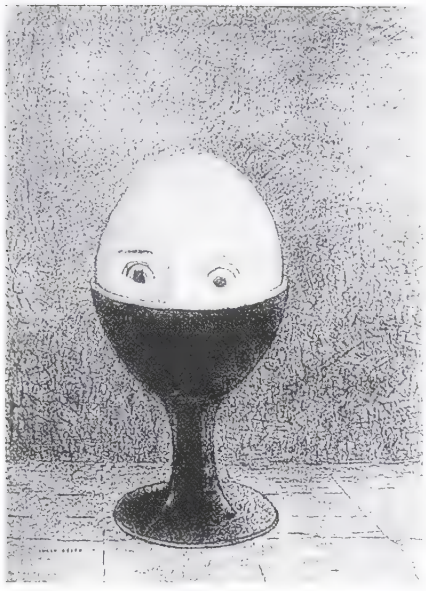
Close to 40 and in full possession of his artistic means, Redon made his name with the publication of several collections of lithographs. "About 1875," he declared, "everything came to me in the form of pencil or charcoal. This rather ordinary medium, which has no inherent beauty, facilitated my attempts to render both chiaroscuro and the invisible. Charcoal allows no light-heartedness; it has a certain gravity. Only emotion allows anything to be made of it" (quoted by Claude Roger-Marx: *Redon, Fusains*, p. 8).

He had first considered a series of drawings based on the *Pensées* of Blaise Pascal (1623–1662). But this produced only two pencil drawings, one of them bearing the inscription "Le silence éternel de ces espaces infinis m'effraie" (The eternal silence of those infinite spaces frightens me; Petit Palais, Musée des Beaux-Arts de la Ville de Paris). Redon gave up the idea, concluding that the subject was "too abstract, even for me."

His first sequence of lithographs was the ten plates assembled under the title *In Dream* (1879). Today, Redon's approach may seem familiar—Surrealism and other trends devoted to the imagination, from Alfred Kubin (1877–1959) to Roland Topor (1938–1997), have accustomed us to it—yet the mood of Redon's work remains completely original. The series includes one of the artist's finest and most enigmatic plates: *Vision*. Two minute human figures, a man and a woman, are seen walking diagonally past the viewer in an attitude which suggests Orpheus leading Eurydice out of Hades. The man's left hand grasps what

Eye-Balloon, 1878
Charcoal and chalk on coloured paper,
42.2 x 33.2 cm (16½ x 13 in.)
New York, The Museum of Modern Art,
Gift of Larry Aldrich

"The eye, like a strange balloon, turns towards the infinite." The themes of the eye and the decapitated head are very common in Redon's work, and no doubt relate to the artist's childhood when, as a very young baby, he was stranded far from his family. The eye turned upwards towards sky would thus be a sublimation of his predicament through art. Hot-air balloons played an important role during the Prussian War of 1870; the besieged Parisians regularly used them to communicate with the rest of France.



The Egg, 1885
Charcoal on paper, 45 x 34 cm (17¾ x 13½ in.)
Belgrade, Narodni Muzej

The expression of this egg rammed into its cup evokes the terrifying enforced immobility of nightmares.

appears to be a crown of laurels and he carries, slung over his shoulder, an object which might be his lyre. They flee across a pavement resembling an enormous chessboard. Behind them stand two tremendous pillars. The darkness behind the pillars is impenetrable, and between them, surrounded by a halo resembling an *aurora borealis*, a colossal eyeball floats weightless, its pupil turned upwards.

The work is typical of Redon in that no single interpretation is decisive, though many are possible. Some authors have compared it to Gustave Moreau's *Apparition* (1875, Paris, Musée National Gustave Moreau), but the narrative content of Moreau's work is clear; at that time, everyone was expected to know the story of Salome. Looking at Redon's work, on the other hand, the spectator is like a child who cannot quite understand what is going on—or even like the dreamer himself. The upward-swivelling eye could be that of a disembodied Cerberus, the watchdog of hell, or even—when we remember that Redon was aware of the unconscious—the vigilant eye of the superego, momentarily averted and thus allowing repressed material to escape. ("Everything," Redon declared, "arises out of a docile submission to the advent of the unconscious"). How remote this is from Moreau's Salome, amazed at the apparition of a bloodstained head!

Redon was at pains to specify why he admired Moreau. He stressed the differences between Moreau and himself, noting that the figures painted by the older artist "are frozen in a sort of optical rhetoric" and concluded that Moreau was "a great watercolourist, without any doubt. A paint-worker who knew painting well, one of the few who did in his day." But, with perception laced with humour, he added: "In the accessories, what admirable virtuosity! What marvellous embroideries, with their old and faded silks, for the cushions of some old lady, a dreamer of luxury, whose life has been impeccable, but who closed her eyes to poverty [...]. A bachelor in life, in art too he was a refined bachelor, hermetically excluding the conflicts of his life. His work is the fruit of this; it is art—nothing but art—and that is no small thing" (*Lettres d'Odilon Redon*, p. 39). The comparison with Moreau clearly brings out how important formal invention is in determining our perception of the subject.

Cyclops
Black crayon on paper,
11.5 x 15.9 cm (4½ x 6¼ in.)
New York, Collection John Rewald

Three years later, in 1882, Redon again depicted an airborne eye. This time it was in the series *To Edgar Poe*, and it assumed the shape of a balloon (cf. ill. p. 42): "Lœil comme un ballon bizarre se dirige vers l'infini" (The eye, like a strange balloon, moves towards the infinite). In this print, the eye faces the viewer, but is, here again, turned ecstatically to the sky. Suspended beneath this peculiar balloon one can just make out a severed head resting on a dish.

A similar eye is the most striking feature of a series entitled *Les Origines* (1883). It is again turned upward, but this time set in the forehead of a cyclops who greets the world with a cretinous smile. In the title, the latter is rather oddly designated by the term "polyp"—perhaps by analogy with the name of Polyphemus, the cyclops who sought to devour Ulysses. Other works present the same subject: the charcoal *The Eye* in the Baltimore Museum (ill. p. 45), the lithograph *A first vision was perhaps attempted in the flower* (1883), and later, *Everywhere Eyeballs are Aflame* (1888), a print in the first series devoted to Gustave Flaubert's (1821–1880) *Temptation of Saint Anthony*. In all these plates, the eyeball is perfectly spherical, a form anticipated in a superb charcoal drawing entitled *The Cannonball*. Huysmans was particularly taken with it and described

The Eye (Vision), 1881
Charcoal and pastel on paper,
32 x 36.9 cm (16½ x 14½ in.)
The Baltimore Museum of Art,
Nelson and Juanita Greif Gutman Fund

The sphere, one of Redon's earlier subjects, here returns suspended in the air like an observation balloon, a bizarre witness of the world's events

The Cyclops, c. 1914
Oil on cardboard, mounted on panel,
65.8 x 52.7 cm (26 x 20¾ in.)
Otterlo, Kröller-Müller Museum

The sometimes naive, sometimes amorous Cyclops, like the "eye" in its various forms, represents Redon himself, that perpetual observer.

The Glance
Oil on canvas, 73 x 73 cm (28¾ x 28¾ in.)
Private collection

Redon mostly portrays faces in profile. When they are turned towards the spectator, they generally reveal a morose or hallucinatory expression–unless the eyes are simply closed. This inquiring glance directed at the spectator is therefore quite unusual.

The Prisoner, 1870s
Charcoal on buff paper,
39.5 x 37 cm (15½ x 14½ in.)
Paris, Musée d'Orsay, on permanent loan
to the Département des Arts graphiques,
Musée du Louvre

"A decapitated head," in Redon's description, "placed on a chequered table behind which there is a young, bareheaded monk and three little winged spirits, smiling mischievously at him."

Hypnos, God of Sleep, 350–200 B.C.
Bronze, height 20.3 cm (8 in.)
Roman copy of an original
Hellenistic bronze now lost
London, The British Museum

The Fall of Icarus
Pastel on paper, 48.3 x 45.7 cm (19 x 18 in.)
USA, The Rothschild Art Foundation

Returning to his theme of the decapitated head, Redon here adapts the form of the ancient winged head of Hypnos in the British Museum.

it in his novel *À rebours* as hanging in the living-room of the fictitious Jean Floressas Des Esseintes. The Louvre also owns a chalk drawing with a grey wash bearing the same title, in which the cannonball stands alone with its shadow.

One might easily imagine a progression between the blind sphere touched by "a sort of Buddhist monk," which might represent a first and hermetic form of the riddle of existence, and the levitating eye, turned heavenward in the dark and lit by its own strange halo. Flying figures were a commonplace of 19th-century art. Pierre Puvis de Chavannes (1824–1898) painted various flying women (he provided some of them with harps), and Symbolist art as a whole delighted in such imagery. But in Redon's case, the subject is never conventional. Severed heads frequently appear in the Black works. They are to be seen floating inside a bubble, drifting like particles suspended in a liquid, or simply resting, with a melancholy but animated and attentive expression, on a dish or a pedestal, as does the lifeless and expressionless head of John the Baptist in religious iconography (*Head of a Martyr*, 1877, Otterlo, Kröller-Müller Museum).

Others appear in unusual attitudes: *The Cactus Man* (ill. p. 55), for instance, is a prickly head with negroid features that sprouts from a potholder; Marsh Flower, in the series *Homage to Goya*, is a luminous head, suspended from a stalk like the bell of a lily-of-the-valley, and the famous *Spider* (ill. p. 50), whose charcoal version was executed in 1881, can be seen as a bodiless head smiling sardonically as it scampers about on ten slender articulated legs. One might also

mention *Guardian Spirit of the Waters*, a charcoal drawing of 1878, which represents a tremendous bodiless head hovering over the ocean above a tiny sailing vessel, the *Winged Head* (London, The British Museum) whose ears extend into feathers, *The Egg*, a lithograph and charcoal drawing of 1885 (ill. p. 44), rammed into an eggcup with its eyes emerging, and *The Balloon*, a charcoal drawing of 1885, in which a head appears in profile inside a balloon, rather like the filament inside a lightbulb. Finally, there is the image dear to the Symbolists (and frequently used by Redon) of Orpheus's severed head (ill. p. 35), which continues to sing as it is carried off by the current on the raft of the lyre. This is a substantial collection of severed heads; what are we to make of them?

There can be no definitive answer. The contemplative immobility of many of these heads might evoke the enforced immobility of the very young child. One might be tempted to establish a connection with the infant Odilon, far from his family and seeking solace in his dreams. The melancholy expressions of some of these heads give weight to this interpretation. Others however,

Spider or ***Smiling Spider***, 1881
Charcoal on buff coloured wove paper,
49.5 x 39 cm (19½ x 15¼ in.)
Paris, Musée d'Orsay, on permanent loan to the Département des Arts graphiques, Musée du Louvre, Gift of Suzanne and Arï Redon

This "terrifying spider, its human face lodged in the middle of its body" decorated the bedroom of Des Esseintes in Huysmans's novel *A rebours*.

The Raven, 1882
Charcoal and black chalk on beige paper,
40 x 27.9 cm (15¾ x 11 in.)
Ottawa, National Gallery of Canada

Illustration for the cover of Edgar Allan Poe's *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque*. "It is the wind and nothing more! / Open here I flung the shutter, when, with many a flirt and flutter / In there stepped a stately Raven of the saintly days of yore" (Edgar Allan Poe: *The Raven*, stanzas 6–7).

Francisco de Goya
The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters, 1797–98
Etching with aquatint, 21.6 x 15.2 cm (8½ x 6 in.)
from *Los Caprichos*, pl. 43

Redon, a native of Bordeaux, could hardly fail to be aware of the astounding œuvre of Goya, who had also been a resident of that town. Though Redon honoured the Spanish artist with his *Homage to Goya*, his gentle tempera ment was quite at odds with Goya's ferocious genius; the two artists have points of contact but cannot justly be compared

(*Germination* in the series *In Dream* or *Embryonic Beings* in the *Homage to Goya* collection), have the smug expression of simpletons. Some of these figures—the spider, *Cactus Man* and *Armour* (a head shown in profile and covered in spines, ill. p. 20)—seem potentially aggressive. The last-named of these is still attached to a body.

Attempting to establish connections between these works and Redon's experience does not exhaust the possibilities of interpretation, but it does suggest why the spectator may sense an inexplicable affinity between them. They perhaps express the pitiful impotence of the individual confronted with the great forces and events which command his life and determine his fate. This applies equally to the winged horse, a constant feature of Redon's work. *The Impotent*

Mysterious Head
Watercolour, 18.4 x 16.2 cm (7¼ x 6½ in.)
New York, The Ian Woodner Family Collection

PAGE 53
Strange Flower (Little Sister of the Poor), 1880
Charcoal, black chalk and black Conté crayon on yellowish cream wove paper,
40.4 x 33.2 cm (16 x 13 in.)
Art Institute of Chicago, David Adler Collection

"There again a desert, desolate, arid site like the landscapes of moonmaps, in the midst of which arises a stalk from which there hangs like a host, like a round flower, a bloodless face of meditative cast," Huysmans wrote in 1881, no doubt thinking of this charcoal drawing.

The Madman or ***Madness: Head with Cap***, 1883
Charcoal on yellowish brown paper,
36.2 x 31.4 cm (14¼ x 12¼ in.)
Paris, Musée du Louvre

Wing did not lift the Animal into that Black Space, the seventh plate of the series *Les Origines*, shows a winged white horse rearing up and falling back heavily on its hindquarters. An 1889 lithograph, *Captive Pegasus*, represents the winged steed of the poet restrained and prevented from taking flight. In several other works, such as *Fallen Angel* (1872) or *Winged Man* (ill. p. 59), beings possessed of wings cautiously move earthbound, their faces haggard and backs bent, through a sterile land.

In 1888 Redon published a first series of plates devoted to Gustave Flaubert's *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*. Flaubert's strange, grandiloquent work has elements in common with Goethe's second part of *Faust II*: both works are unusually dense and were not really intended for the stage, despite their dialogue form. Redon devoted three entire albums, a total of 42 plates, to *The Temptation*, in which Flaubert offers an encyclopaedic and carefully documented overview of the state of religious speculation during the first centuries of the Christian era.

Redon obviously felt drawn to the visionary character of the book; its composition had been suggested to Gustave Flaubert by a painting (then attributed to Pieter Bruegel the Elder (c. 1526/31–1569) which he had seen in the Palazzo Balbi in Genoa in 1845. Flaubert's presentation of fantastical and bewildering conceptions might have been designed to attract Redon, who loved mythical and mystical figures precisely to the extent that they allowed him to express things

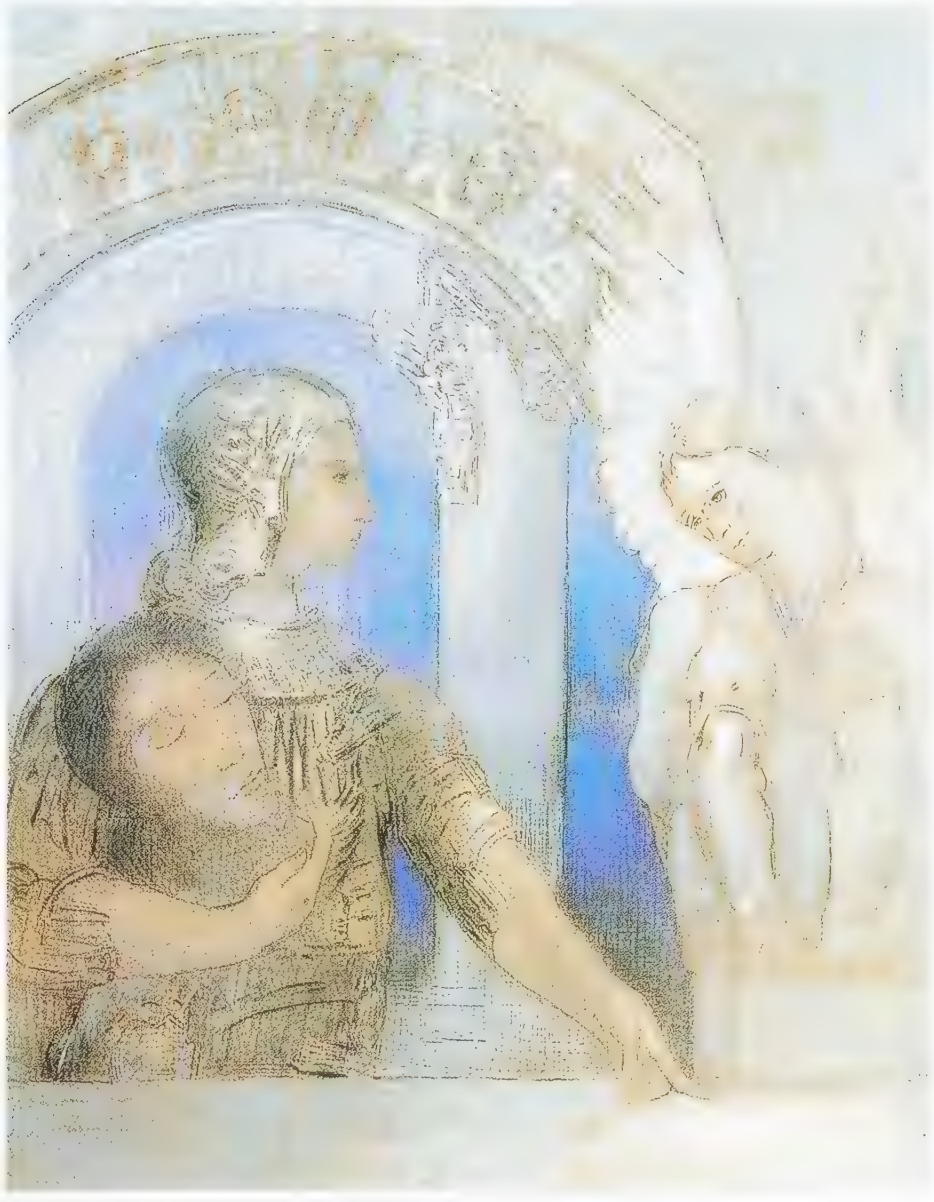
ODILON REDON

The Cactus Man, 1881
Charcoal on light brown wove paper,
49 x 32.5 cm (19¼ x 12¾ in.)
New York, Andrea Woodner Collection

which would otherwise have remained unutterable—particularly matters relating to "the origins."

Oannes, one of the protagonists of *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*, appears not only in lithographs, but in several late paintings (ill. p. 70). Flaubert, apparently prompted by the hybrid imagery of the painting he had seen (either a copy of Hieronymus Bosch or the work of one of his followers; it was certainly not a Bruegel), presents him as "a singular being, with the head of a man on the body of a fish. He advances standing upright, beating the sand with his tail." The derision this apparition prompts in Saint Anthony elicits the plaintive request: "Respect me! I am coeval with the origins [...]."

The Masked Anemone
Watercolour, 24.5 x 17.5 cm (9¾ x 7 in.)
Private collection



Winged Old Man with Beard, c. 1895
Pastel on greyish beige paper,
56.9 x 39.7 cm (22½ x 15¾ in.)
Paris, Musée d'Orsay

The winged old man is often an allegorical representation of Time, but, with Redon, it is best to avoid too precise an interpretation, given the artist's desire to create the kind of indefinite outlines that could favour dreams.

Mystical Knight or
Œdipus and the Sphinx, c. 1892
Charcoal heightened with pastel on greyish brown paper on canvas,
100 x 81.5 cm (39¼ x 32 in.)
Bordeaux, Musée des Beaux-Arts

Angel of Shadows
Pencil, with wash, on paper,
17.5 x 13.5 cm (7 x 5¼ in.)
Private collection

The figure of the winged man has various meanings in Redon's work. The most original in its symbolic overtones is the winged man groping his way forward instead of flying, a further evocation of the profound sense of impotence that Redon himself had to overcome. In this work we see an allegorical figure: on the open page of the book one can decipher the words "Dante" and "Enfer" (Hell).

"The origins." This, it seems, was the main subject of Redon's now painful, now speculative ruminations. But the artist had no desire to produce "literary" work: "What are the limits of the literary idea in painting?" he asks. "We are agreed. A literary notion is present wherever formal invention is lacking." And, as we have said, it is Redon's "formal invention" which cultivates ambiguity and the indefinite, putting to good use a certain awkwardness of handling, that makes his subjects come alive.

It was this twofold aspect of his work that struck Pierre Bonnard (1867–1947): "I have the greatest admiration for Odilon Redon. What strikes me above all is the conjunction in his work of two almost contradictory qualities: the very pure formal substance and a very mysterious expressivity." And he added: "The man is full of benevolence and compassion. Our entire generation is under his spell and follows his advice" ("Hommage à Redon," *La Vie*, 1912, quoted in catalogue Paris, 1984, p. 6).

Redon's weak points are also significant. One of them is the expressions of some of his imaginary creatures—their features can be bland. In contrast, his portraits, such as those of Jeanne Roberte (ill. p. 19), his son Arï (ill. p. 18) or his artistic friends Bonnard, Édouard Vuillard (1868–1940), Paul Sérusier (1864–1927), Maurice Denis (1870–1943), painted around the turn of the century, or the beautiful portraits of women he subsequently produced in pastel, all have highly eloquent features (ill. p. 12).

This blandness is perhaps what he had in mind when he declared "I owe to my country origins those sad faces that you know, and which I drew because I saw them and because the eyes of my childhood had preserved them in the inmost harmonies of my soul." But the weakness is also due to the fact that Redon's imagination was more taken with basic emotions (fear, sorrow, surprise, wonder) than with traits of character. The artist's real concern touches

Thought, c. 1875
Oil on paper on cardboard,
22 x 26 cm (8¾ x 10¼ in.)
New York, Andrea Woodner Collection

upon profound, "metaphysical" issues which relate to the sense of anxiety and wonder of early childhood. For the same reason one can hardly make out the features of the figures in his most successful imaginary works. They are essentially indistinct, as in his charcoal *Diogenes* (c. 1890, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.) or his *Haloed Virgin*, a pastel of 1898 (Amsterdam, Van Gogh Museum).

From the early 1890s, Redon's art began to move in an entirely new direction. In a letter to Émile Bernard on 14 April 1895, he takes stock of his situation, acknowledging the extreme emotional demands made by such works: "It is true that I am increasingly forsaking black. Between ourselves, it exhausted me; I believe it springs from the depths of our being. It is, all told, the most essential colour, is it not? After making certain drawings (imperfect, it is true), I have felt as I might after some debauch [...]" (quoted in catalogue Paris, 1984, p. 52).

Winged Man or ***Fallen Angel***, 1890–95
Oil on paper, 23.8 x 34 cm (9¼ x 13½ in.)
Bordeaux, Musée des Beaux-Arts

"The eternal silence of those infinite spaces frightens me."

BLAISE PASCAL, *PENSEES*

Icarus or *The Offering*, c. 1890
Oil on paper on canvas,
52.1 x 38.1 cm (20½ x 15 in.)
Private collection

Enchanted Cave or *Cave of Shadows*
or *Cave of Pythia*
Oil on wood, 46 x 29 cm (18 x 11½ in.)
Private collection

Brunhild* or *The Valkyrie
Pastel on paper, 54.4 x 67.5 cm (21½ x 26½ in.)
New York, The Ian Woodner Family Collection

Brunhild, the heroine of *The Valkyrie* and *The Twilight of the Gods*, is shown here in the last opera of Richard Wagner's *Ring Cycle*. Siegfried has been treacherously stabbed by Hagen, and Brunhild spurs her steed Grane to leap on to the pyre where Siegfried's body lies.

Pegasus, the Horse on the Rock, c. 1907–10
Pastel on paper, 80.7 x 65 cm (31¾ x 25½ in.)
Hiroshima Museum of Art

Battle of Centaurs, after 1910
Watercolour, pen, black Indian ink
and Conté crayon on ivory wove paper,
17.8 x 25.3 cm (7 x 10 in.)
New York, The Museum of Modern Art,
Gift of The Ian Woodner Family Collection

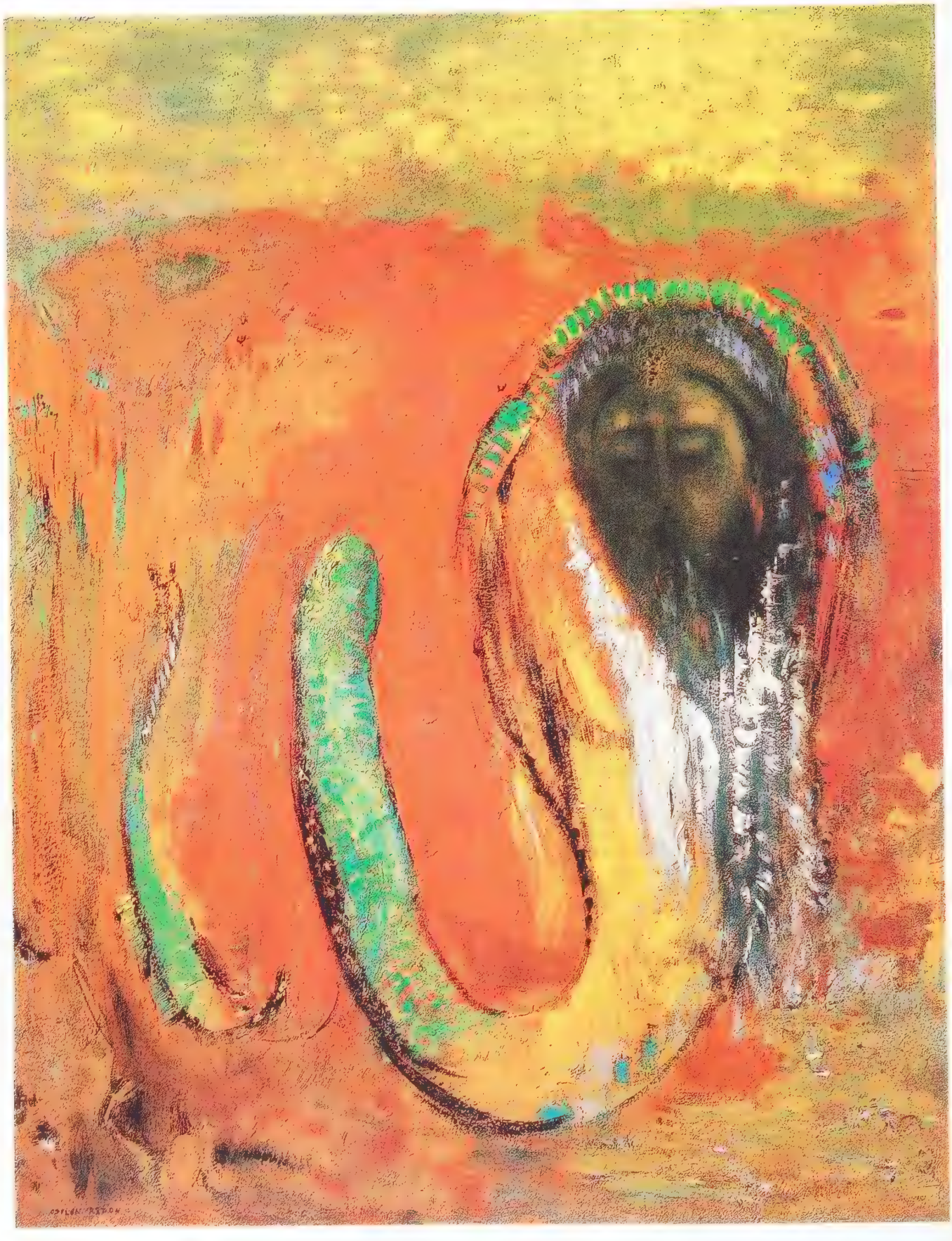
Fight between a Woman and a Centaur
Pastel on paper, 58.2 x 46.7 cm (23 x 18½ in.)
Private collection

Saint George and the Dragon,
1880s and c. 1892
Charcoal heightened with pastel on
tan wove paper, 53.7 x 37.5 cm (21¼ x 14¾ in.)
Washington, D.C., National Gallery of Art,
Gift of GTE and the New Century Fund

Phaethon
Pastel on paper, 66 x 94 cm (26 x 37 in.)
Private collection

Ruggiero and Angelica (Perseus and Andromeda), c. 1910
Pastel on paper, 50.5 x 40.6 cm (20 x 16 in.)
Staatliche Museen zu Berlin,
Schart-Gerstenberg Collection

The Chariot of Apollo, c. 1910
Pastel and tempera on canvas,
91.5 x 77 cm (36 x 30¼ in.)
Paris, Musée d'Orsay



The Light

A fundamental change occurred in the 1890s. The artist was then moving into his fifties; a few years earlier his first child, born after six years of marriage, had died at the age of six months. Redon wrote some poignantly self-revealing pages about the emotional bonds created by fatherhood. We remember that his marriage, in his own words, had been founded on "a certainty even more complete than my vocation." Now, with the birth of his second child, Arï, on 30 April 1889, two and a half years of mourning were dispelled. "It is too beautiful!" Redon wrote to his mother. The exclamation suggests how anxious he was; but when, in October, the vital first six months had passed, his fears began to subside. The event took on a greater significance because his own early childhood had been marked by emotional desolation, and the confirmation that a child alone can bestow had been slow in coming. We have the artist's own word for the considerable impact it was to have on his personal and artistic development.

The black period had allowed Redon to clear his accounts with the past. The art by which he had done so remained for others to enjoy, but it had been a sombre œuvre. Was he willing to bestow upon his newborn child this alien heritage of private anguish? Apparently not. For there suddenly appears in his work a quite unprecedented ferment of colour and of light; the pastels in which it appeared were to become his main medium. "The life that we unfold," he was later to observe, "can also reveal joy."

There are times when Redon surprises one by the simple aptness of his language. A case in point is the expression "the life we unfold" (rather than the more commonplace "life we live"). It implies that a creative activity is manifest in life itself, in the sometimes unexpected way in which a personality develops; this, he seems to say, is the condition of individual fulfilment. It is at all events clear that Redon's art underwent a fundamental change at this point. He turned to pastel and promptly began to create new and radiant visions. His art was revitalised. An important factor in this transmutation was his own fatherly affection, which Redon described as "the very creation of the child: it is his prize, his conquest, his triumph."

Emblematic of this unexpected transformation are the "chariots of the sun," of which Redon painted many. He first remarked on their significance in 1878, when discussing the large painting Delacroix had executed for the ceiling of the

"With my eyes more widely opened upon things, I learnt how the life that we unfold can also reveal joy."
— ODILON REDON, 1913

Oannes (Christ and the Snake), 1907
Oil on wood, 65 x 50 cm (25½ x 19¾ in.)
New York, The Ian Woodner Family Collection

Oannes, half-man, half-fish, appears not only in the lithographs but in several later works. Redon came across him in Gustave Flaubert's *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*.

Galerie d'Apollon in the Louvre. The work deeply impressed him: "It is the triumph of light over darkness. It is the joy of daylight contrasted with the sadness of night and shadows." Delacroix had painted the chariot, horses and serpent surrounded by a multitude of other figures. Of these, Redon had no need; the economy of means exemplifies his modernity (ill. pp. 67, 69).

The transformation in Redon's art would not be convincing if it had been the product of an act of will. But the dazzling change he underwent during the last decade of the century was inward: both simple and profound. The causes were, perhaps, more complex and diverse than I have suggested. A comparison drawn from music (which played such an important part in Redon's life) may make this clear. The music of Gustav Mahler (1860–1911) is always more abundantly inventive (and thus more affecting) when it expresses anguish, sorrow and distress. Yet there are moments when the composer seems to think it appropriate to conclude a symphony on a positive and triumphant note. At such moments, critics have noted, "his voice cracks." Not so with Redon. His work continued to flow out of him. In his quest for perfection of form, his fluency remained even as he sought to replicate in the new medium of pastel the mastery of *chiaroscuro* he had gained in charcoal. He once told Andries Bonger: "My entire art is confined to the resources of *chiaroscuro*; it also owes a great deal to the effects of abstract line, which acts directly upon the spirit as the agent of deepest inspiration."

Two somewhat contradictory observations may serve to cast some light on the turning-point in Redon's work. "Painting," he wrote in 1905, "means confirming a special meaning, an inborn significance, so that a rich substance can emerge, in the same way that nature creates diamonds, gold, sapphires, agates, precious metals, silk and flesh. One is born with the gift of sensuality; it cannot be acquired." This is the voice of Redon clearly rejoicing in the liberated sensuality of his late work, a sensuality which was to illuminate the last 25 years of his life. However, a few years later, while he was lecturing in Holland, he declared that black "is the most essential colour [...]. Black should be respected. Nothing prostitutes it. It neither pleases the eye nor awakens sensuality."

This prompts us to take a closer look at the way we perceive colour. Night, as we know, is colourless. In darkness we only make out shapes and silhouettes, and all the resources of our mind are devoted to identifying them. The retinal cells that are sensitive to colour take no part in this. One might say that night is a time of apprehension and "prehension," of attention and analysis. We rarely dream in colour but move through our dreams as if through some inner night. Though most dreams derive from an emotional nucleus, the dreamer struggles to understand and master their unfolding.

Daylight alone allows us to see colour. In daylight, colour assuages our senses, speaking to the emotions directly and without intermediary. Colour, like smell, bypasses thought and impacts directly upon the emotions. A blend of scents, a juxtaposition of colours can make the heart leap while the analytic powers, so vigorous in the dark, are short-circuited. One might also contrast the "daylight" instrumental tones of music with its more "nocturnal" structures. Tone quality—the blending of instruments which lends music its true, intangible materiality—also touches us at a prelinguistic level.

Redon's work between 1890 and 1916 led him to shimmering juxtapositions of colour. His finest work effortlessly communicates a sense of space, freedom and weightlessness. Above all, it delights, and the sense of delight transfigures everything, driving out the old demons.

Closed Eyes
Oil on gold ground on cardboard,
30.5 x 28.5 cm (12 x 11¼ in.)
Private collection

Closed Eyes, 1890
Oil on canvas, 44 x 36 cm (17¼ x 14¼ in.)
Paris, Musée d'Orsay

This was the first of Redon's works to be acquired by the French state, and the event had a symbolic value for the painter who felt that his country had at last acknowledged him: "This is a piece of news that makes me rejoice [...] for those faithful few who supported me through thick and thin."

Closed Eyes, c. 1894
Oil on cardboard, 44.5 x 36.5 cm (17½ x 14¼ in.)
Tokyo, Fujikawa Galleries

These heads have a clearly androgynous aspect, like Leonardo's *Saint John the Baptist*. The formal treatment, with the *sfumato* background and the delicately sculpted face, also owes something to Leonardo. In both versions there is a flat surface in the foreground that suggests a stretch of water from which the giant head emerges. Redon's injunction to work "in the same way that nature creates diamonds, gold, sapphires, agates, precious metals, silk and flesh" seems particularly applicable to the several *Closed Eyes* with their different tonalities.

There were, however, other factors that played a part in this transition. We should take into account the artist's deepest conviction, as he expressed it in a little text written in 1908: "A painter who has found his technique is of no interest to me. He gets up in the morning without passion, and he quietly and peacefully continues with the work he started the day before. I suspect he feels much the same kind of boredom as that experienced by a conscientious worker who goes about his duties without any unexpected moment of happiness to light his day. He does not suffer the sacred torment that rises from the subconscious and the unknown; he expects nothing of that which is to come. I love what never was." This love of "what never was" goes to the very heart of Redon's creative powers; he could paint only "according to [himself]."

It seems that the artist went through a spiritual crisis during the 1890s. He was approaching 60 having, as Roseline Bacou points out, spent his life as a witness to rather than an actor in the major artistic events of his day. True, he was admired by a number of artists and poets whose opinion was respected, but there had been no breakthrough. And the events of his life seemed to follow an underlying pattern of "death and resurrection."

"Abandoned" as a child, he was "accepted" in marriage; his first-born's death was followed by a resurrection of sorts in the birth and survival of his second child. From Redon's sensibility as revealed in his writings, it would seem that these are some of the factors (with others which we cannot know) that brought about his dazzling and belated transformation: his emergence into daylight.

The transition was gradual. It began with the giant figure in *Closed Eyes* (1890, ill. p. 74), a work—exceptionally—dated by the artist. The head seems to rise out of the sea, filling the horizon. Certain critics see in this figure the feat-ures of Madame Redon, but the nose is different from those in the portraits of the artist's wife, and the face and neck are of undeniably masculine proportions—even though the overall effect is as androgynous as that of Leonardo's *Saint John the Baptist* (Paris, Musée du Louvre). From a formal point of view, incidentally (the *sfumato* of the background and the delicate modelling of the face), the whole work owes something to Leonardo. The colour here is still subdued; Redon later described the work as "a bit grey," but it represents a crucial step in the artist's move towards colour.

One might be tempted to see in this figure rising from the waters of death into a grey dawn a Christ-like image of the resurrection. The figure emerges, but the eyes are closed; we remain in suspense. A variant of this work executed a few years later (ill. p. 75), accentuates the Christ-like aspect of the head by surrounding it with a halo that is only suggested by extremely delicate brush strokes. The foreground of the second painting, of more summary execution for the most part, does not suggest water, and we are reminded that Redon, in several of his portraits, placed a neutral horizontal strip in the foreground to mark, as it were, a separation. If we are tempted to recognise a watery surface in the foreground of the work above, its indefiniteness emerges even more obviously.

About this time, explicitly Christian figures occur: Christ, the Virgin, the Holy Women. One such is the *Christ of Silence* (1895–98, Petit Palais, Musée des Beaux-Arts de la Ville de Paris), which might almost be a sequel to *Closed Eyes*. Redon treats Christian images in much the same way as he does the *Buddha* (whom he represented in several superlative pastels, one from around 1905, ill. p. 10) and other religious figures: as though they signified a universal urge towards salvation. It is a salvation through which life's meaning is unveiled and serenity is won.

Veiled Woman, c. 1895 -1900
Pastel and chalk on blue paper, 47.5 x 32 cm (18¾ x 12½ in.)
Otterlo, Kröller-Müller Museum

Similarly, one might interpret the numerous pastels of women in boats as images of a voyage of initiation, where life itself is an initiation accomplished via "the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune." The voyages may even be an allusion to the artist's wish to have been born on the open sea, in "a place without a homeland, over an abyss." The father who rather frightened him is no longer present; the vessel holds one woman, or two at most. And Redon, "already conceived and close to being born," accompanies them, as the golden sail carries them off towards the land of Cockayne.

The Mystic Barque (ill. p. 26) is one of Redon's masterpieces; its formal simplicity and the intensity of the colours makes reproducing it a hazardous undertaking. The bright blue vessel, borne over green waters, sails beneath a sky dappled with gold and silver. The bright yellow of the sail sets off the blue of the hull, fascinating the eye. Indeed, it is tempting to perceive in this a vision from the early years of the artist's life: a reminiscence of those days in which the tiniest details stand out with hallucinatory intensity, filling the child's eye with profound happiness. Several other pastels—*Woman in a Boat* (1897), *Haloed Virgin* (c. 1898, Amsterdam, Van Gogh Museum), *Holy Woman in a Boat* (c. 1897, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Scharf-Gerstenberg Collection), *The Barque* (c. 1902, ill. p. 27)—are variations on this theme.

Redon described his *Haloed Virgin* in the following terms: "A dark brown sky with violet and red clouds; to the left, a haloed figure in a barque, sheaves of gold on the prow of the barque, and on the waters a sort of blue phosphorescence, like a will-o'-the-wisp" (quoted in Bacou, 1956, no. 76). The "sheaves of gold" are rather ambiguously drawn (a chain, brambles, a mooring rope?), like the thorns encountered in other pastels of the period, for instance, *Christ* (c. 1907, Paris, Musée d'Orsay). Having once used colour, Redon would never turn back: "I wanted to do a charcoal drawing, as I had in the past," Redon wrote to Maurice Fabre in 1902. "It turned out to be impossible; I have broken with charcoal. When it comes down to it, only new matter allows us to renew ourselves [...]. I have espoused colour" (*Lettres d'Odilon Redon*, p. 50).

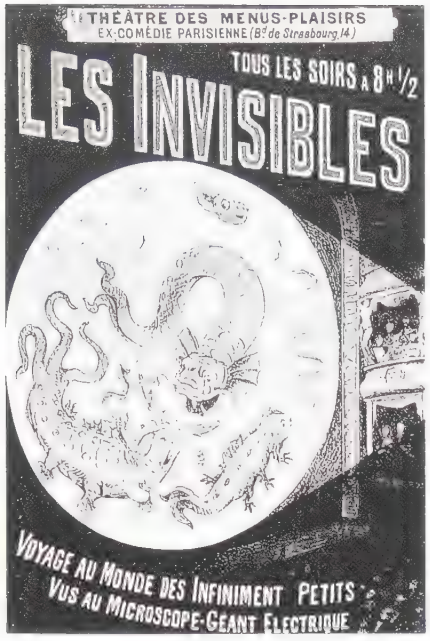
In the last two decades of the century Redon got to know Paul Gauguin. They met at an exhibition in 1886, and their letters testify to their mutual esteem: "You are a true artist (though unfortunately you do not have the esteem you deserve)," Gauguin declared (in a letter quoted in Bacou, 1956, p. 185). There is something comical about Redon, who could never be parted from his wife and child, exclaiming on Gauguin's departure for Tahiti: "What a splendid life! And what an example! In order to be able to paint in the open air and in a beautiful light, he has abandoned his wife and four children!" (quoted in catalogue, Bordeaux, 1985, p. 145). On this point Vincent van Gogh (1853–1890) was closer to Gauguin and closer to the truth. He wrote to his brother Theo: "Physically he [Gauguin] is stronger than we are; his passions too, must be stronger than our own. First he has children, then he has his wife and family in Denmark; at the same time, he wants to go to the ends of the earth, to Martinique. The conflict of desires and incompatible needs which all this must generate in him is dreadful [...]."

In September 1890, before sailing to Tahiti (and not Martinique as Van Gogh had initially thought), Gauguin wrote to Redon, citing Wagner: "I believe," the composer had written, "that the disciples of high art will be glorified; robed in a celestial weave of rays, perfumes and melodious chords, they will return and lose themselves forever in the bosom of the divine source of all harmony." "And so, my dear Redon," Gauguin concluded, "we shall meet again." Gauguin died on

Bust of a Man with Eyes Closed, Surrounded by Flowers, c. 1905–14
Watercolour and pencil,
25.5 x 17.7 cm (10 x 7 in.)
Paris, Musée d'Orsay, on permanent loan to the Département des Arts graphiques, Musée du Louvre

Anemones in a Jug
Pastel on paper, 39.5 x 29.5 cm (15½ x 11½ in.)
New York, The Ian Woodner Family Collection

Flowers in a Vase
Oil on canvas, 72 x 40 cm (28¼ x 15¾ in.)
New York, The Ian Woodner Family Collection



Anonymous
Théâtre des Menus-Plaisirs: The Invisible, 1883
Poster for a showing of projected microscope enlargements, 1883, colour lithograph
Ottawa, National Gallery of Canada

The botanist Armand Clavaud showed the enthusiastic Redon the shimmering world of the infinitely small through his microscope, an instrument not then widely diffused. The poster is in amusing contrast with the luminous colours of Redon's work.

8 May 1903 in the Marquesas, and that same year Redon, much affected by his death, painted a posthumous portrait of the artist he admired—*The Black Profile (Gauguin)* (1903–04, Paris, Musée d'Orsay). In it the profile of the self-proclaimed "savage"—the aquiline nose of which Gauguin was quite proud (and which he liked to accentuate in self-portraits, depicting himself as "harder" than he actually was)—has been softened and endowed with an almost feminine mildness.

Mythology occupies an important place in Redon's later work. We again encounter the *Chariot of the Sun* and *Pegasus*, the winged steed of the poets. But Pegasus is no longer captive, his wing is no longer "impotent" (as in the first series of lithographs); we see him pawing the ground as he prepares to take flight from a mountain top (in a pastel executed about 1900, ill. p. 63), or spreading his large green wings as he tramples a dragon (*Pegasus and the Hydra*, c. 1907, Otterlo, Kröller-Müller Museum).

The serpent also returns under various forms. A rather unusual oil of around 1907 is entitled *Oannes* or *Christ and the Snake* (ill. p. 70). It resembles Redon's paintings and lithographs of the Chaldean divinity, Oannes—a human head on the body of a fish. Here the head is attached to the green rings of a huge snake, and the scope for interpretation is considerable. Commentators invoke Redon's interest in Hindu thought, in which "good and evil are intimately connected and not antithetical" (Bordeaux catalogue, 1985, p. 168). But one might equally invoke the Talmudic tradition which ascribes the same numerical value to the word "Meshiah" as to the Hebrew word for "serpent." One may further note that, in this myth, the serpent sets time in motion, while the Second Coming of the Messiah is expected to end it. This mode of representation is of interest because it suggests the fertile and as yet unconceptualised myths which underlie every culture and which works of art unwittingly present. "Unwittingly" because any work of art is shaped partly by the broader dream of the community, and the latter, in its turn, commands the way each of us perceives the world and understands good and evil. We cannot claim to know Redon's opinion of this. As we have seen, he favoured the indefinite and indeterminate. Nothing else could, in his view, stimulate thought.

During the last 15 years of his life Redon executed large-scale decorations for private residences: in Paris in the home of the composer Ernest Chausson (1901); in the home of Robert de Domecy at Domecy in Burgundy (1902); and at the home of Gustave Fayet, Fontfroide Abbey, in the Aude (1910). He wrote to Andries Bonger on 17 January 1901: "I am covering the walls of a dining-room with flowers, dream flowers and imaginary beasts: all of this on large panels, and working with a bit of everything, tempera, aoline, oil and even pastel [...]. Where are my *Noirs* now?' (*Lettres d'Odilon Redon*, pp. 43–44). These commissions were on quite a new scale for Redon, who had almost always favoured a modest format. They allowed him to work out a decorative format that never tips over into abstraction, but in which the real and imaginary flowers and plant forms—always recognisable as such—are somehow light, airy and dazzlingly luminous.

During the final years the oils and especially the large pastels became increasingly iridescent, as though designed to surprise the eye and rejoice the heart. The monsters are transfigured: *The Cyclops* painting (c. 1914, ill. p. 46) becomes a gentle supplicant who rises above a richly coloured landscape, petrified with admiration in the presence of a female nude. And one wonders, remembering the theme of the single eye in Redon's work, whether the Cyclops does not stand for the artist himself: he whose eye had first been lifted to the

Beasts of the Sea-Floor
oder ***Marine Monsters***, c. 1915
Pastel on paper, 60 x 49.4 cm (23½ x 19½ in.)
New Orleans Museum of Art

Mysteries of the Sea, c. 1903
Oil on canvas, 35.5 x 24 cm (14 x 9½ in.)
Private collection

Underwater Vision, c. 1910
Oil on canvas, 166 x 96 cm (65¼ x 37¾ in.)
Private collection

Sleeping Cat
Oil on canvas, 54.9 x 38.5 cm
(21½ x 15¼ in.)
Private collection

Flowers, Red Panel, 1905–06
Oil and tempera on canvas,
159.5 x 113.5 cm (62¾ x 44¾ in.)
Private collection

"marvellous clouds" of Charles Baudelaire's (1821–1867) celebrated prose poem, then plunged into contemplation of the shadows, before returning to the daylight aspect of the world and finding in it abundant consolation.

The paintings of the last years were often very free in form, entirely devoted to the interplay of colour and to sometimes unexpected associations of forms. *Homage to Leonardo da Vinci* (ill. p. 9), with its reminiscences of the Italian master, and the oil paintings *Mysteries of the Sea* (ill. p. 84) and *Underwater Vision* (ill. p. 85) fit this description. The last of these reveals a highly musical form consonant with the spirit of the age, and carries Redon's manner to its logical conclusion. The first decade of the 20th century is already the age of Futurism, of Cubism: of the *Demoiselles d'Avignon* (New York, The Museum of Modern Art). We find no trace of all this in Redon. Here, on the contrary, everything is shimmering light in an almost ecstatic mastery of radiant colour.

The transfiguration in Redon's work is perhaps best illustrated by *The Chariot of Apollo* (ill. p. 89) in the Woodner Collection. Here the redoubtable dragon has become a large, blind, pink worm, writhing on a lawn over which butterflies gambol; Redon seems to suggest that his size is just a matter of our proximity. But up there, in the light which lends the butterflies their colours, the horses of the sun triumphantly paw the air, never weary of propagating the light.

This is an appropriate image on which to conclude, for it summarises the itinerary of Odilon Redon. Like other children of solitude, he emerged from the shadows and quietly recreated the world in his own image. But we should be careful to avoid excessive interpretation. "Every pen wants to draw me into its faith," he wrote to Edmond Picard, on 15 June 1894. "It is wrong to assume that I have goals. I make art and nothing else."

The Chariot of Apollo, c. 1912
Oil on canvas, 99.7 x 74.9 cm (39¼ x 29½ in.)
New York, The Museum of Modern Art,
Gift of The Ian Woodner Family Collection

Butterflies
Watercolour, 22 x 15 cm (8¾ x 6 in.)
Private collection

"For Redon, butterflies–like flowers–combine the symbols of youth and passing time, of beauty which fades and life which blossoms and dies."
(Agnès Lacau St Guily Wildenstein Institute)

Butterflies, c. 1910
Oil on canvas, 73.9 x 54.9 cm (29 x 21½ in.)
New York, The Museum of Modern Art, Gift of Mrs. Werner E. Josten in memory of her husband

Odilon Redon
1840–1916
Life and Work

1840 Odilon, second son of Bertrand Redon and Marie-Odile Guerin, is born on 20 April at 24 rue Neuve Saint-Seurin (now 31 rue Fernand-Marin), Bordeaux, as Jean-Bertrand Redon (known as Odilon). Shortly afterwards, the family moves to 26 allées Damour, where Redon believed that he was born; he spelt it allées d'Amour.

1840–51 Odilon, entrusted to the care of his uncle, spends his childhood on the family estate in Peyrelebade in the South of France.

1851 Joins his parents in Bordeaux and is sent to school for the first time.

1855 Takes drawing lessons with the water-colourist Stanislas Gorin.

1857 At his father's behest, Redon studies architecture. Attempts to enroll for architecture at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris, but fails the entrance examination. He becomes friends with the botanist Armand Clavaud who helps him discover the literature of his day and teaches him botany and the rudiments of natural science and gives him an account of evolutionary theory.

1859 Travels to Uhart in the Pyrenees with his friend Henri Berdoly.

1864 Practises sculpture in Bordeaux. Attends Léon Gérôme's atelier libre at the Paris École des Beaux-Arts. Due to a heavily diverging conception of art, the relationship of master and pupil is tension-filled from the beginning.

1865 Back in Bordeaux, Redon meets Rodolphe Bresdin, who teaches him etching and lithography.

1867 The etching *The Ford: Landscape with Horsemen* is accepted by the Paris Salon.

1868 His *Roland at Roncevaux* is accepted by the Salon but Redon chooses not to exhibit it.

Selfportrait, c. 1880
Oil on canvas, 46.4 x 33.3 cm (18¼ x 13 in.)
Lille, Palais des Beaux-Arts

Publishes an account of the Salon in Bordeaux newspaper *La Gironde* in which he defines his attitude towards contemporary trends. Spends the summer in Barbizon, where he meets Camille Corot.

1870 His friend the architect, Albert Carré, commissions him to decorate a chapel in Arras. He takes part in the war against Prussia as an enlisted volunteer and is involved in action on the Loire.

1872 Redon moves to Paris. He returns to Peyrelebade every summer. He is a frequent guest at Madame de Rayssac's literary and musical salon, where he meets Henri Fantin-Latour, Paul Chevanard and, some years later, his future wife, Camille Falte.

1873–77 Studio at 81 boulevard Montparnasse. Beginning of his great creative period. Works almost exclusively with charcoal and lithography—*Les Noirs* ("black" works).

1874 When his father dies, the family runs into financial difficulties.

1875 During the spring, makes studies of trees and undergrowth at Barbizon. Trip to Brittany.

1878 Travels to Belgium and Holland. Admires Rembrandt.

1879 Publishes his first album of lithographs, entitled *In Dream*.

1880 On 1 May marries Camille Falte, a young woman of creole descent from Ile Bourbon.

1881 First solo exhibition of charcoal drawings in the premises of the Paris magazine *La Vie Moderne*.

1882 Exhibits charcoal drawings in the premises of the Paris daily *Le Gaulois*. Publishes the album entitled *To Edgar Poe*. Meets Joris-Karl Huysmans and Émile Hennequin who introduces him to Stéphane Mallarmé the following year.

1883 Publishes the album entitled *Les Origines*. Beginning of his friendship with Mallarmé.

Portrait of Madame Redon, 1882
Oil on canvas, 45.5 x 37.5 cm (18 x 14¾ in.)
Paris, Musée d'Orsay

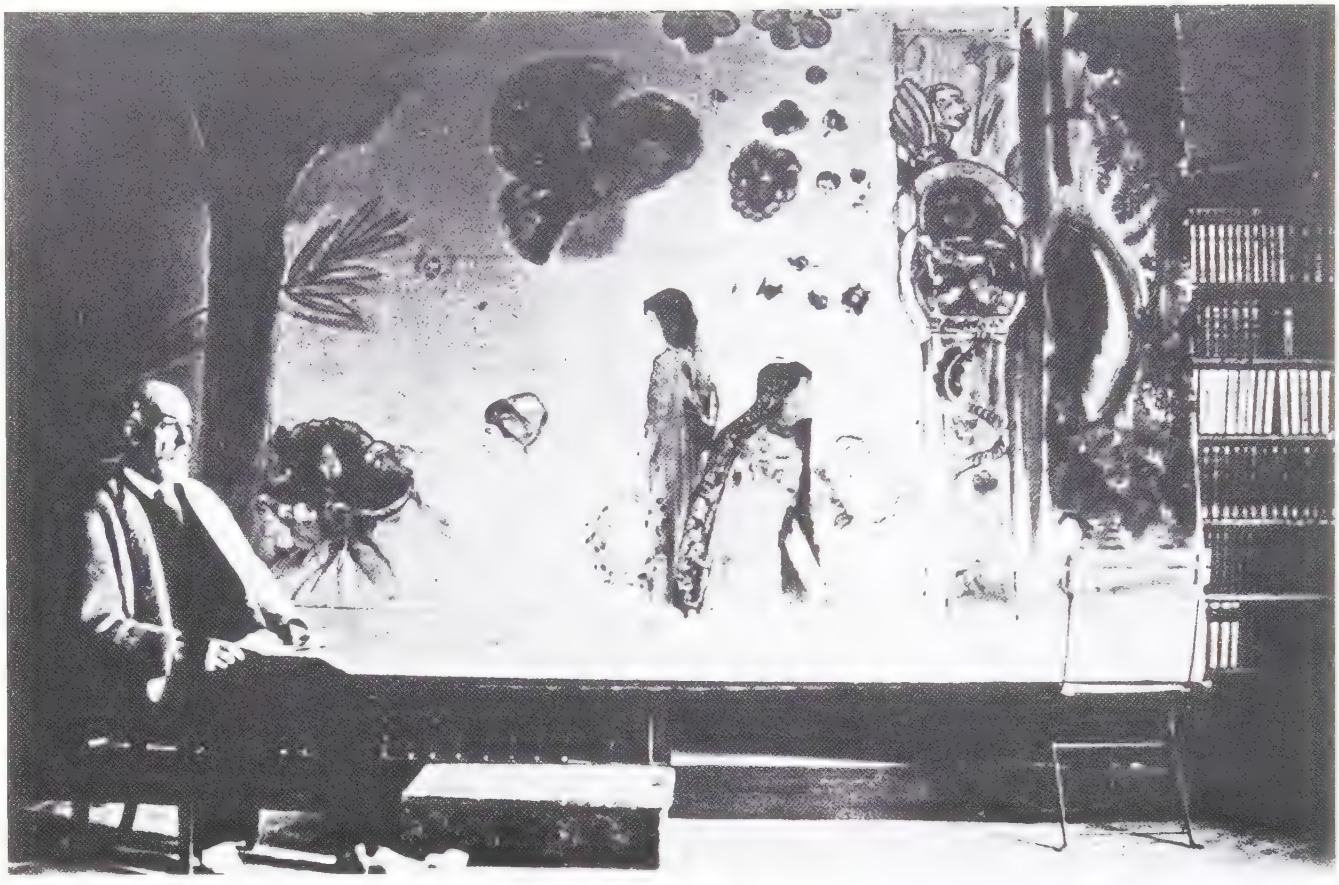
1884 Redon takes part in organising the first Salon des Indépendants of which he was later president, then vice president. Joris-Karl Huysmans publishes his novel, *À rebours*, in which he describes works by Redon. In November his brother Léo dies.

1885 Publishes the album entitled *Hommage á Goya*. In January death of his sister Marie and his teacher Rodolphe Bresdin.

1886 His first son, Jean, born 11 May, dies 27 November. Album entitled *La Nuit*. Exhibits with Gauguin at the Salon des XX in Brussels.

1887 Illustrations for Edmond Picard's mono drama *Le Juré*. Frontispiece for Emile Verhaeren's *Les Soirs*. Works with Fantin-Latour for *La Revue Wagnérienne*.

1888 Publishes the album entitled *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*. Foundation of the group of painters called the Nabis



1889 Publishes the album entitled *To Gustave Flaubert*. Takes part in the first Painters-Engravers' Exhibition at Durand-Ruel's. Meets André Mellerio, his future biographer, who later introduces him to Maurice Denis. His son Arï is born on 30 April.

1890 In February, travels to Brussels with Mallarmé. Publishes the album entitled *Les Fleurs du Mal*. Begins working in pastel. Paints *Closed Eyes* (ill. p. 74). On 1 December, his friend Armand Clavaud commits suicide. Closer contacts with Gauguin.

1891 Publishes the album entitled *The Dreams*, dedicated to the memory of Armand Clavaud. Jules Destrée publishes *L'Œuvre lithographique d'Odilon Redon* in Brussels.

1894 Exhibits at Durand-Ruel's in April.

1895 Travels to London.

1896 Illustrates Bulwer Lytton's *The Haunted and the Haunters*. Publishes the third of his albums on Gustave Flaubert's *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*.

1897 Peyrelebade having been put up for sale, Redon spends eight months there, from April to November.

1898 Exhibits at Vollard's. Spends the summer in Villa Goa at Saint-Georges-de-Didonne, to which he returns every year for some ten years.

1899 Publishes his last album, *The Apocalypse of John*. Exhibits with the Nabis at Durand-Ruel's.

1900 Travels to Italy with a patron of the arts, Robert de Domecy. Maurice Denis paints his *Hommage à Cézanne*; Redon is depicted in front of a painting by Cézanne, surrounded by Pierre Bonnard, Édouard Vuillard, Ker-Xavier Roussel, Paul Sérusier, Ambroise Vollard and Mellerio.

1901–02 Decorative panels for Ernest Chausson in Paris and Robert de Domecy at the Château de Domecy in Burgundy. Friendship with Gustave Fayet. Vuillard visits him at Saint Georges-de Didonne.

1904 An entire room at the Salon d'Automne, founded the preceding year, is devoted to the work of Redon. The Musée du Luxembourg acquires *Closed Eyes*.

1905 Moves to 129 avenue de Wagram.

1907 Organises an auction of his works at the Hôtel Drouot in the hope of buying back Peyrelebade. Travels to Switzerland in the summer.

1908 Travels to Venice with Arthur Fontaine. Works for the Gobelins. *Homage to Bresdin* at the Salon d'Automne. Redon writes the preface.

1909 Spends the summer at Bièvres.

1910 Decorates the library of Fontfroide Abbey (Aude) at the request of Gustave Fayet.

1913 40 of his works are exhibited at the Armory Show in New York, Chicago and Boston. Marcel Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase* triggers a scandal. Mellerio publishes the catalogue of his etchings and lithographs.

1914 Last journey to Holland. Arï Redon is drafted by the army.

1916 On 6 July, Redon dies in Paris. He is buried in Bièvres cemetery.

PAGE 94
Odilon Redon in the library of the Abbey de Fontfroide, in front the panel *Night*, 1910

PAGE 95
Odilon Redon in his studio on avenue de Wagram, Paris, 1913

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Odilon Redon in 1880

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The Golden Cell (The Blue Profile), 1892
Oil on paper, 30.1 x 24.7 cm (12 x 9¾ in.)
London, The British Museum

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